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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 005174

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TAGS: PREL PARM TSPL KNNP ETTC ENRG TRGY IN

SUBJECT: MILD PARLIAMENT DEBATE SHOWS CONGRESS ENJOYS
SUPPORT FOR NUCLEAR DEAL

REF: NEW DELHI 5120

Classified By: Ambassador David Mulford for Reasons 1.4 (B and D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Meeting at a November 30 roundtable, Indian observers thought that the November 28 lower house debate in Parliament on the civil nuclear cooperation initiative effectively showed that the Congress Party has the strength to go forward on the deal. Several analysts pointed to the surprising lack of interest, as shown by the relatively sparse attendance at the debate. The restraint shown by two regional parties which had earlier opposed the deal added to the impression that a majority in Parliament supports the deal. On the margins of the discussion, journalist Pranab Dhal Samata told poloff that Rahul Gandhi, General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee, had prepared a pro-deal speech but did not deliver it, which Samata thought indicated lingering concern from Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi, who may still hesitate in associating the family name with the nuclear initiative. Following on the heels of the lackluster debate, the upcoming Rajya Sabha debate will likely feature more pointed opinions as political parties clarify their positions and the more vehement critics have the opportunity to speak. End Summary.

Sparse Attendance Shows Lack of Commitment in Opposition and Left

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¶2. (SBU) Indian observers participating in a November 30 roundtable discussion opined that the paltry presence of Members of Parliament (MPs) during the November 28 nuclear debate in the Lok Sabha (lower house) revealed the lack of fervor by most members to opposing an initiative that clearly benefits India. According to the Indian Express, the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) occupied only 13 of its 22 allotted benches, with five of the 13 holding one MP each (the benches can accommodate three MPs comfortably). As for the Left, only one-third to half of its membership showed up at various times during the six-and-a-half hour discussion. While several Congress MPs also did not appear, Congress President Sonia Gandhi and External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee sat through the bulk of the debate, while Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was absent for only 30 minutes. In contrast, BJP leader L.K. Advani, who spoke second in the discussion, left after his speech and returned several hours later at the end of the debate just before he staged a BJP walkout when the PM declined to respond. DNA reflected the general lack of energy by titling a November 30 editorial, "A Lifeless

Debate."

Third Front Confusion Strengthens Government

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¶3. (SBU) Reporting on the debate, media highlighted that two parties in the United National Progressive Alliance (UNPA, also known as the Third Front; its composition of regional political parties recently voted out of state governments has prompted the moniker United Non-Performing Assets) softened their opposition, effectively abandoning an alleged deal to unite with the Left in opposition to the nuclear initiative. The press saw the Samajwadi Party's statement by Ram Gopal Yadav as indicative of a new, muted position by the formerly virulent SP. "I request you to clear the apprehensions regarding the deal and get the support of our party and Parliament," Yadav appealed to the PM, whose "credibility, patriotism and intellectual capacities" he praised. SP General Secretary Amar Singh responded November 29, clarifying that while the PM is "a man of honor, the deal is not an honorable agreement and we reject it lock, stock and smoking barrel." SP sources told the Telegraph, however, that the SP had purposely softened the statement to reach out to the Congress Party, which could prove a useful ally in the SP's Uttar Pradesh heartland. The November 30 Times of India also wondered why the SP had fielded only Yadav in the debate out of its 38 MPs in the Lok Sabha.

¶4. (C) Further contributing to the muddiness in the UNPA, the Andhra Pradesh-based Telugu Desam Party (TDP) gave the impression that it made no statement at all. The TDP clarified November 29 that its MP had actually tabled the statement and left. On the margins of the November 30

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roundtable, Indian Express reporter Pranab Dhal Samata told poloff that he had dinner with a TDP leader in the Rajya Sabha the night before. According to Samata, the TDP member realized that he had to make a statement against the deal in the upcoming Rajya Sabha debate, but he could only think of arguments in favor of it. He justified his party's stance against the nuclear deal as "politically expedient" since he thought it would have little impact on the government's ability to go forward but would bolster the TDP's stance against the Congress Party in heavily Muslim areas of Andhra Pradesh.

Rahul Gandhi Stays in His Seat

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¶5. (C) While the Congress Party made its support for the nuclear deal clear, Samata told poloff that All India Congress Committee (AICC) General Secretary Rahul Gandhi had drafted a detailed and science-based defense of the deal that he wanted to deliver in the Lok Sabha debate. "He was going to talk about de-carbonization and the benefits of the environment," Samata said. However, when the date of the debate changed, only MPs Jyotiraditya Scindia and Sachin Pilot -- both friends of Rahul -- spoke. Samata said that he could only come to the conclusion that Sonia Gandhi does not yet want the Gandhi name associated directly with the nuclear initiative. Although he acknowledged that Sonia Gandhi did support the deal, he surmised that her support may not extend very deeply, though he admitted that he lacked proof of Sonia's supposed interference.

Will PM Singh Act at the End of his Tenure?

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¶6. (C) Samata also highlighted a November 29 speech made by PM Singh at a private book launch for Commerce Minister Kamal Nath, a speech for which the Indian Express delayed publication of its November 30 edition. Speaking of the need to do more for the country, the 75-year-old PM emotionally expressed his concerns for the future of India. "The decisions we take and the decision we do not take will have

profound implications on the future of our country," he said, adding that he is "praying" that India remains a "functional democracy." "I am at the fag end of my life," the PM admitted. "I think the best we can do is to help transform the mindsets." Samata said that the PM's introspective speech, which also promoted more trade, flexible labor rules, education, and health, took the selected politicians, bureaucrats and editors by surprise. "There was a wave of shock," he told poloff. Although the PM did not address the nuclear deal directly, Samata thought that his frustration with nay-sayers on the nuclear issue fueled the Prime Minister's heartfelt plea.

¶7. (SBU) Manoj Joshi, senior editor of the newly launched daily Mail Today, also linked the Prime Minister's waning days with the Congress Party's new-found resolve to move the nuclear deal forward. As he wrote in a November 22 column, Joshi observed that the PM underwent prostrate surgery in mid-September in the midst of the political turmoil, and he has recovered slower than doctors expected. Joshi said that he saw the PM's re-engagement in the nuclear deal as proof of his improved health, but his age has limited his ability to act as strongly as he may have wanted.

Comment: Government Comes Out On Top -- For Now
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¶8. (C) The Lok Sabha debate raised enough questions to poke a hole through the Left's and BJP's contention that a majority of the Parliament opposes the nuclear deal. With sustained support from the Congress Party and its allies, and enough muddiness generated by the flip-flopping of the Third Front, the UPA can claim a victory. First, however, the Congress must survive what could be a fierce debate in the Rajya Sabha scheduled for December 4. The SP and TDP will likely make their positions against the deal more clear, while the BJP and Left will field vociferous critics: Arun Shourie, Yashwant Sinha, Brinda Karat and Sitaram Yechury. The Congress Party, meanwhile, has its older guard in the upper house, and will continue to count on the expressions of support from its regional allies and outlying parties.

MULFORD